BOOKFORUM

INTERVIEWS

Bookforum talks with Albert Mobilio

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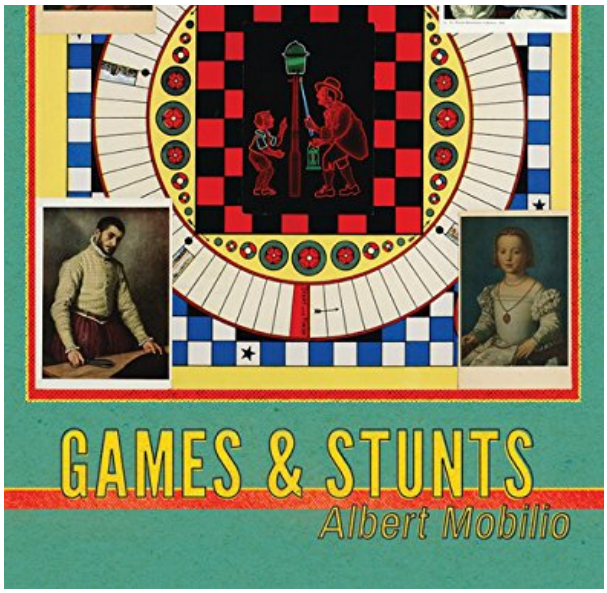
GAMES & STUNTS BY ALBERT MOBILIO. BLACK SQUARE EDITIONS. PAPERBACK, 136 PAGES. $17.

From the story of a race with no finish line to the story of a hunt for a used slipper, the mischievous, ludic distortions of Albert Mobilio's Games & Stunts *are like images in a funhouse mirror reflecting both gaming culture and culture at large. "This is the way of the world," squawks one narrator, parroting a shopworn mantra whose Trumpian tang tastes extra bitter these days, "all against all, winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." But Mobilio's sardonic literary gloss on competition defies Manichean simplicities. You can't easily win a race when there's no finish line.*

Indeed, at its best, the practice of literature resembles a race with no clock or final standings. Awards and best-seller lists create the illusion of a glamorous competition, but writers compete against their own creative capabilities more than anything else. Mobilio



Albert Mobilio

has received prestigious literary recognition but the true measure of his success is his smart and idiosyncratic body of work. His poetry, fiction, and criticism combine a keen and wide-ranging intellect with an unfailing linguistic precision. Shot through with Mobillio's characteristic acumen, Games & Stunts *is a sly comic masterpiece about the games people play. I recently emailed with Mobilio (who is a contributing editor of* Bookforum*) about the place of games in both literature and life.*

Each of these linked stories begins with a set of instructions adapted from an early-twentieth-century manual titled *Games & Stunts*. What other rules, if any, did you use in composing the stories?

I wanted to use not only some of the directive language from the manual but also capture a sense of the complications and convolutions in the instructions. We often describe social or interpersonal actions as games because we perceive certain patterns that suggest adherence to rules. But those rules are barely articulated. We feel them more than we know and understand them. The rules for the parlor, yard, and word games that I adapt are explicit and granular in detail. I wanted to suggest that our emotional lives may be governed by precepts at least as involved as these parlor diversions but perhaps too idiosyncratic to be articulated.

The poetic—even goofy—tenor of the instructions contrasts with the stern imperative voice in which they're delivered. How do you understand this tension between rules and

means by which you are supposed to have fun." When I was first reading them I had the thought that games are the dark cousins of play. Play is about the pleasure of doing; games more about the pleasure of having done. Of completion. Of victory. The hyper-directive language seemed apt to our current culture and lives. In a world ruled by binary operations, games are the original binary division: They divide us into winners and losers. Games—experienced as both participant and spectator—are efficient ways of controlling and expressing anxiety.

Many of the stories' characters are ambivalent or indifferent toward winning and losing. When Jack, for example, gets knocked out of a game of "Hotball," "he's fine with sitting it out." Are there alternatives to this binary?

Thinking about that now, I see that Jack's disposition echoes the beginning of Beckett's *Murphy*, in one of my all-time favorite passages: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free, in a mew in West Brompton." Murphy's no deterministic cipher. But there's that twist—"as though he were free." Murphy hasn't really escaped because he cannot sit out of himself. Jack can sit out of the game but he's still subject to the implications of its rules and the consequences of its conclusion. We imbibe the social game so those things are as real within him as they are out on the field.

In "Broom Lever," the narrator describes Jack as "a strong man," then immediately revises that description to "a strong-*ish* man at least." How do you understand gender in relation to the win-lose binary and the nature of games more generally?

Strong is, well, a strong word—a monosyllable that punches the hard *g*. But *ish*—with its sibilance and sense of diminution—undoes that decisiveness. A number of the characters sound out words and are alert to their sensory dimension. We're always tilting the binary opposition one way or the other and language is a very effective way to slide anything—ethnic identity, gender, religious beliefs—along the continuum. The various current debates about identity and naming attest to this power.

The stories mix realism with what used to be called fabulism. The characters reveal recognizable psychological dimensions but their situation—a group of five adults who are only seen playing games—is unrealistic, if not absurd. Balancing those storytelling modes and tones wasn't always easy. A lot of the digressions—the stories within the story—were trimmed because they unbalanced the overall effect I was aiming for. But I did keep some set pieces—the linguistic games that are more like prose poems, for instance—because I enjoyed writing them and thought they functioned in counterpoint to the more straightforward narration.

Even in the less poetic stories, your prose is a well-honed blade. The phrasings and rhythms are unnervingly precise and, often, darkly funny. How did you cultivate this particular style and how does it compare to the way you work in other genres such as poetry and criticism?

Without doubt my work as a poet and an editor make me especially aware of wordiness—often debilitatinglyso. I've edited some pieces out of existence. But I do try to hang on to and emphasize a laugh, particularly the grim variety.

The titles of the stories—"Pom-Pom-Pullaway," "Hunt the Slipper," "Pat and Rub"—capture the book's tone of absurd bemusement.

Looked at one way, the entire proposition behind playing games is silly. Looked at another, games are revealing metaphors for love, worship, ambition, our own psychologies. We make frequent use of these game metaphors, and this figuration is often trotted out to show the realpolitik that undergirds all human activity. I wanted to present actual games, rather goofy ones, to isolate them from common understanding. Vince Lombardi's famous quote, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing," is typically deployed to suggest our Darwinian nature. But if you're thinking about winning in terms of a game that involves passing a slipper under the legs of people sitting in a circle—that knocks some of the dire stuffing out of its import.

dance or a circus act. It's done solely to display or test the body.

What kind of a game player are you?

Not much of one. Too impatient and easily frustrated. On one hand the arbitrary nature of games—like the arbitrariness of art—intrigues me. But as a player, it provides an all-to-ready excuse to quit.

In what ways does literature resemble, and differ, from games?

That arbitrary quality, especially evident in form, is one shared feature. Why fourteen lines in a sonnet? Why is one tale a novella yet another a short story? And when we think about content—particularly Modernist and postmodern literature—there's the game of identifying symbols and allusions. The footnotes to *The Waste Land* seem to be Eliot's joke about that process. But overall, the interpretative approach to much literature is akin to employing a secret decoder ring. The game is to discover the meaning behind the text rather than respond to the words, the syntax, and the immediate emotions that these elements spark. Literature might be best approached as play. Paul Valery describes poetry as "the perfect adaption in the sphere of the perfectly useless." I like the idea of art that doesn't *intend* to mean even though it surely does.

Your epigraph comes from French sociologist Roger Caillois's *Man, Play and Games* (1958).

He describes play as an "uncertain activity" and says, "Doubt must remain until the end." Games are very much like stories with surprise endings. The conclusion of any basketball or poker game is unpredictable and that is part their deep appeal. We desire and dread uncertainty—it's both thrilling and potentially disastrous. Games and stories allow us to enact those emotions and to pretend the consequences of that enactment are slight. At first, the games my characters play appear external to their lives, but I think we learn that's not the case. The game matters.

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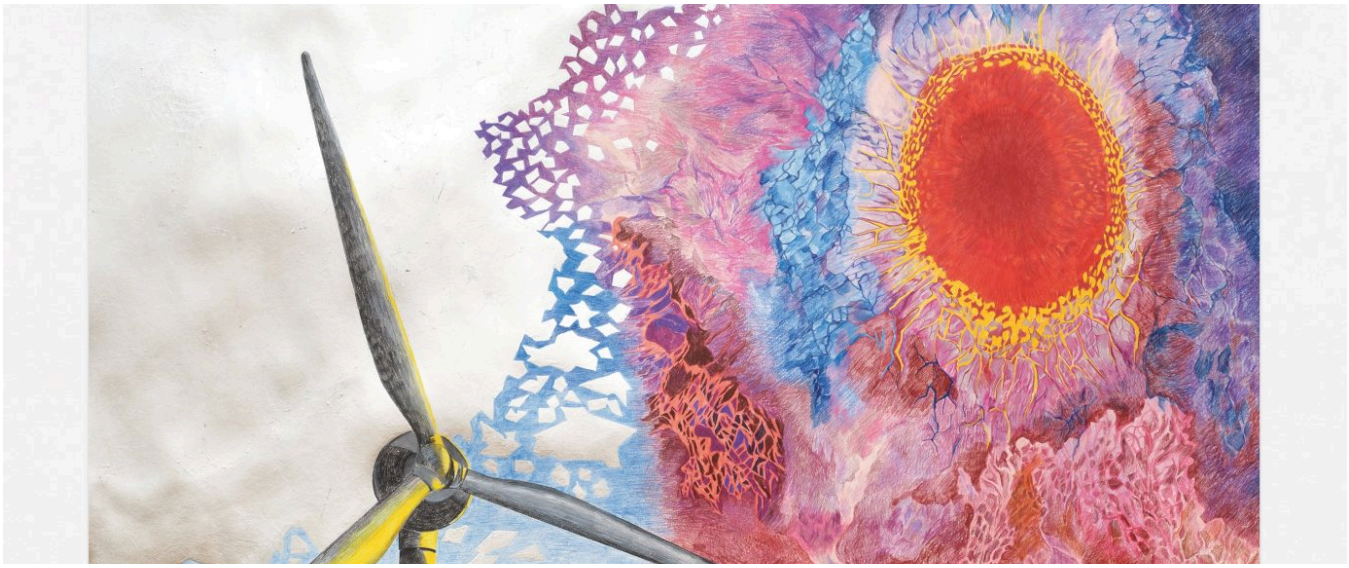

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